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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are given for involving working class adults in various forms of adult education. The material is derived from practical experience of the Workers' Educational Association (W.E.A.) and the Institute of Extension Studies in Liverpool, where experimental methods were developed for involving the working class communities in central Liverpool in adult education. It is shown that the W.E.A. is uniquely placed to make a major contribution in this field, because of its national organization and its network of tutors and branches, but that it must recognize the need for new flexibility and accessibility and a decision about priorities, as well as cooperation between W.E.A. branches, local education authorities, and universities. (CL)

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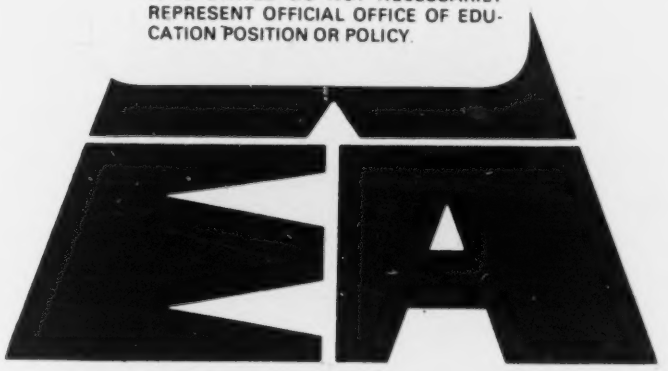

EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES and the W.E.A.

THE CASE FOR REFORM

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INTRODUCTION

The West Lancashire & Cheshire District Committee are pleased to publish this pamphlet by Tom Lovett and Keith Jackson as a contribution to the continuing debate on the future role of the W.E.A. The Committee wish to make it clear that the views expressed are entirely those of the authors and have arisen from their experience in the field.

When the District appointed Tom Lovett to the E.P.A. Project as a pioneer venture it was with the general problem of the early leaver in mind and was based on a realisation of the need for a full time person to have the freedom to experiment. Although it was uncertain whether implications for the movement as a whole would emerge it was recognised that the seemingly foolhardy attempt to provide education in such an extreme area of deprivation would be worthwhile in itself.

It is in fact only two years since I wrote the initial case for such an appointment and only eighteen months since Tom took up the post. Yet national interest both within the W.E.A. and in other adult education circles has been so great that his work had to be on view to visitors from all sections of adult education almost from its inception.

It is still too early to make a full assessment of Tom Lovett's work. The number of projects he has initiated are a tribute to his imaginative approach and no-one could have so readily accepted the brief and brought to bear such appropriate skills, not least his resilience when faced with disappointment and frustration. There is much still to be done and lessons to be learnt from both successes and failures. His views, together with Keith Jackson's, clearly reveal their concern and commitment to our task in society.

Keith Jackson's contribution in the field of Community Development, which was sponsored by the Liverpool Council of Social Service and the University Institute of Extension Studies are complementary to the specific adult education field work of Tom Lovett. This is all part of a new approach to the problem of an inner city area from which patterns of co-ordination for all voluntary and statutary resources are beginning to emerge.

We hope to publish a full report fairly soon, meanwhile this pamphlet reveals the trends which have emerged and some of the aspects which need detailed discussion, in view of their implications for the movement as a whole. Ideas and viewpoints arising this pamphlet would be very welcome.

It is appropriate that our partnership with the University should be a continuing one in these latest developments in education for the early school leaver.

David Conner
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EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES

and

THE W.E.A. - THE CASE FOR REFORM

How seriously do we take the business of producing an effective system of adult education in Britian which will serve the needs of more than a minority? Many adult education agencies would not agree with the following unequivocal statements, but how many would actively support them.

"The Russell Committee can suggest ways of making systematic provision, re-distributing available resources so the underprivileged get a bigger slice, and developing new kinds of courses meeting their needs".

"The first thing the Russell Committee can do is a Newsom style public relations exercise on behalf of the people who need adult education most, the ones who for a huge variety of reasons missed out on ordinary education".

The W.E.A. is one agency which should wholeheartedly agree with such comments. Even more important is should also be in the foreground of any attempts to work out their implications in practical concrete terms. The movement must recognise that it is not just a matter of paying attention to the grossly underprivileged, in areas such as those identified by Plowden for priority treatment. Adult education methods developed in such areas merely focus attention on the inadequacies of the present system in attracting students from more stable secure working class neighbourhoods.

There is, in fact a huge actual potential demand for adult education in working class communities which can be realised if the W.E.A. is prepared to remove its shackles and adopt a radically new approach.

Numerous articles have appeared in recent years urging the W.E.A. to adopt such a radical approach to the problem of adult education for the working class. Unfortunately most of it has been of a theoretical nature concerned very much with the "why" aspect of the problem rather than the more practical issues like "how" to solve it and what methods to use.

It would appear that so much "talking round the problem" indicates a certain amount of unease at the prospect of breaking old moulds. New approaches, radical approaches to any problem inevitably involve the organisations concerned in fundamental questions to do with purpose, values, methods and structure. Not surprisingly many draw back from the brink. Yet if the W.E.A. is sincere in its commitment then these questions must be asked and answered.

During the last few years experimental methods and techniques have been developed for involving the working class communities in central Liverpool in various forms of adult education.

The purpose of this article is to offer some suggestions based on this practical experience of the W.E.A. and the Institute of Extension Studies in Liverpool, in the hope it may contribute something of value to a more general debate throughout the movement.

It does not claim to have found final solutions to what is a major problem within the educational system as a whole. Nor is the Liverpool work unique, other Districts are also showing that the movement is capable of innovation.

The Liverpool experience has convinced us that adult education must be seen as an integral part of a whole series of community based activities concerned with the total community and not with a self chosen minority.

What is blatantly obvious at present is the lack of an educational policy for tackling the problems of the downtown communities in our large cities. Such a policy would attempt to draw together all the educational resources in the community and bring them to bear on the areas of greatest educational need. The W.E.A. is ideally placed to carry out this function particulary if its resources, in terms of tutors and branches, can be supplemented to meet the need where it is greatest and not be spread so thinly throughout the country.

In practical terms this would mean that the tutor/organiser and his branch would fill a number of separate but related roles. Some would be similar to that of community development workers but with a bias in terms of the education of adults. The Tutor Organiser in Liverpool has assisted a group of local residents to set up a youth and community centre. This exercise became in fact "a learning situation" with the residents acquiring particular organisational skills in successfully tackling a real problem.

It may be offering community groups practical assistance of an educational nature, e.g. helping the residents in the Liverpool Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project to draw up their plans for the area; assisting a Community Council to explore the educational facilities in the neighbourhood it represents. This means in practice attending a great many such community group meetings so that links can be established with the W.E.A. When the opportunity arises assistance of an educational nature can be offered, if a W.E.A. representative is present. This is vitally important because residents are often unaware that adult education can be of assistance in tackling certain problems and that numerous educational resources are available to meet many of their needs – thus the benefit of a "team" approach as exhibited in the Liverpool E.P.A.

Another role is that of helping parents to keep their children occupied in useful play. During the summer of 1970 a summer play scheme was organised in the hope of educating both parents and children. Success was limited, but this year an attempt will be made to so structure the exercise that both parents and children will be able to learn as much from the exercise as possible. In downtown city areas children's play is one of the most pressing problems facing parents and adult education can be a vital factor in its solution.

Other functions include setting up discussion groups for mothers to discuss personal and social problems. These have been very successful because they are accepted as both social and educational events. Informality is an essential ingredient and the tutor must be accepted by the group in a way which is not necessary in more formal adult education classes. Pub discussions on topics of general interest have also proved popular once the critical suspicion of "education" is removed.

In another area of Liverpool a house to house survey was conducted and informal classes organised in hairdressing, keepfit and dressmaking. This in a district within a short distance of a local authority community centre and a college of further education. We also discovered a number of isolated individuals with interests in art, languages, politics, G.C.E.'s Plans are afoot to use local students to act as counsellors for these adults to help them make use of the various courses in these subjects available in the city.

Other adult activities in the pipeline include an E.P.A. show designed to bring together parents, teachers and school managers to discuss the nature and purpose of education; a credit union established by local residents with our assistance; a training scheme to help residents organise a summer camp for local children; a local radio series

on the problems of family and neighbourhood to be used as an educational aid by tutors working with existing groups; an attempt by the Claimants Union to influence the performance of the Department of Health and Social Security.

Much of this work involves using various educational resources available in Liverpool e.g. a local comprehensive school; the marriage guidance council, Shelter; the child poverty action group; a local community arts centre; the colleges of education and local radio. The resources are numerous, but unco-ordinated and unused by that section of the population most in need - the unskilled and semi-skilled working class.

The important link in this sort of work is its contribution to the process of social change in an area of social, economic and educational deprivation. Thus hairdressing is not just a pastime activity but is on many occasions, an important factor in restoring self-confidence and helping young mothers to cope with the numerous problems they face daily. Pub discussions were directed towards a review of the problems facing residents in the area. This could lead to a learning situation of a more practical nature. Here lies the essential difference between this sort of work and normal W.E.A. programmes. In an E.P.A. we are concerned with the contribution of adult education to the total process of social change in the area - it is, in fact, a contribution to community development. Traditional W.E.A. programmes are too often concerned with isolated unconnected groups pursuing their own special interests.

In Great Britain today the W.E.A. is uniquely placed to make a major, national contribution in this field. With its historic sense of commitment to work of this nature, its national organisation and network of tutors and branches it could be responsible for initiating a major redistribution of adult educational resources in this country. Certain important factors are in its favour if it recognises the need for new flexibility and accessibility and a decision about priorities.

The need for flexibility and accessibility

The W.E.A. argues that the need for education is a permanent condition of active citizenship and membership of society, not a temporary satiable demand. Its response to lack of participation by so many must be more imaginative than the plaintive question: "Why don't they join us?" The opportunity for education must be wider than the chance to join a certain kind of club. Rejection of a particular form of education, offered in a certain kind of way can not be put down to gross insensitivity or stupidity. This is what the social services are now recognising about people's apparently perverse failure to accept welfare rights and social services.

People don't choose not to have their needs satisfied. They just have different needs at different times and places. New learning may be required to satisfy many of these needs. For some the need is to increase their enjoyment of and satisfaction from Shakespeare's poetry and drama. For others it is to understand emotionally as well as intellectually, the threat to their dignity posed by an inadequate environment, or rapid changes beyond their control. For some it is to know how to improve their health and appearance. For some it is to improve their skills for a better job. For others it is to understand their children's development. We can only find out by listening, not by telling them how good we are. We can only listen by taking the trouble to find out where people are and what they wish to tell us.

The mechanics of listening may involve a survey, or regular contact with many groups and individuals, or trying find out what is wanted by experiment. The result raises enormous questions about the flexibility and accessibility of what we have to offer. This is particularly so in areas where the needs can least well be met by the sort of classes we provide at present.

The social services are already exploring the implications of listening, with new forms of community work, with highly localised and informal advice centres, with new combinations of voluntary participation in providing services with new forms of professional team work. For an essential corollary of listening is to ensure that the flexibility of the service which is offered reflects available knowledge and understanding about its nature. The same applies to education as to the social services. What do we mean by education for adults? Do we relate to adult education what unnerving since it implies given to primary education? Sometimes this can be somewhat challenging some aspects of our policies which have required a long and hard campaign and are only now beginning to show success.

For instance, we have rightly fought for decent accommodation but the heat of the contest should not distort our judgement. Adult education centres are important and valuable for certain purposes but for others may not be either accessible or acceptable. Programmes of classes have to give way to events and activities linked in a more flexible fashion. Many W.E.A. branches have recognised this in the variety of programmes associated with their classes including films, visits, debates, readings and concerts. It is now a question of pressing this sort of approach more systematically in working class communities as a result of defining priorities.

A Decision on Priorities

A decision about priorities requires the movement to face squarely the implication of its present stage of development. As a voluntary association its membership must be satisfied, and new members recruited to its existing committees, as well as to its classes. As an educational movement, and as an employing body, it must be true to the principles which it urges on the rest of the educational system, and in particular those which raise questions about the middle class bias in adult education. The relations between these two sides of the movement have never been spelled out properly and the consequence is that policies have been confused. This is particularly true of its employment of professionals to develop the education service.

Since the development of industrial courses this situation has required clarification, a policy for community adult education with the priority on inner urban areas makes such clarification imperative. If this nettle is grasped then the chief strengths of the W.E.A. will emerge, i.e. the tutor organiser and the voluntary branch.

The tutor organiser - educational innovator

The job of tutor organiser is not unique to the W.E.A. but it is nowhere better established. There is a substantial body of experience and a collective sense of purpose among W.E.A. tutor organisers as a result of belonging to a national movement. The consequential commitment, and high standards coupled with teaching flexibility is very evident in the W.E.A.'s work.

The role of tutor organiser in the W.E.A. makes it possible to an unusual degree to develop both the sensitivity to educational need associated with good teaching, and the eye for new and flexible arrangements of the effective entrepreneur. This combination is vital if community adult education is to be more than efficient social service administration. The tutor organiser is an extremely valuable resource which has been by no means fully exploited. Community adult education by the W.E.A. can exploit the positive aspects of the role but there must consequently be a recognition of the chief deficiencies in the current employment situation which present obstacles.

The tutor organiser commonly has too great an area to cover and too many organisational demands to meet. Within his area he acts as officer to a good number of branches, while as a professional employee of a district he rightly tries to develop new work

in his own right. Finally he is expected to carry a substantial and demanding teaching programme. Only strong commitment to the work has made it possible to spread energies and abilities so widely and yet produce innovations and retain high standards. The more professionally aware tutor organisers become the more they recognise that more concentration of effort would produce more solid results.

One type of concentration has been the specialised approach of the industrial tutor organiser. Mainly they have emphasised their teaching role because organisation has become more straightforward through the relatively well forged links with trade unions, shop stewards organisations, and industrial establishments. Coverage in depth, focusing on the work place, has replaced general coverage.

We are advocating concentration and specialisation in urban areas, for the same reasons but emphasising different aspects of the tutor-organisers role. Often formal teaching will give place to the use of educational skills for recognising learning possibilities and for encouraging or creating the means by which they might be developed.

Instead of a class programme the tutor organiser will be responsible for a set of related and linked activities whose educational purpose will depend on the quality of his professionalism rather than obvious formal criteria. He will, in fact, be a spearhead in a professional approach to adult education which is more than either traditional class teaching or better administrative practice. He will require at least an equal concentration of his time and energies as the industrial tutor. A small geographical unit of population, or some specialised organisation to which he can be attached, like the Liverpool E.P.A., will match the segmental approach to the work place.

The W.E.A. will need courage to make the internal adjustments required to employ teams of tutor organisers for this kind of urban adult education. The movement will also need courage to champion forms of education which do not fit into bureaucratic pigeon holes. All the weight of the national movement will be needed to convince the authorities that education cannot be weighed or counted in classes. Equally the resources of the movement and it partners and friends will be needed to maintain quality and a degree of reasonable accountability in the new role which is necessary if public money is to be spent on the new programmes of work.

The branch - base camp and support services

The second chief strength of the W.E.A. is its network of voluntary branches. These like the tutor organiser have great potential flexibility.

The effective branch is a highly suitable base from which a tutor organiser can move out to promote community adult education. But branches are exaggerating their rights and ignoring their responsibilities as part of the movement if they expect him to concentrate on servicing their own internal needs. Expensive resources must not be tied up in this way. The branch member and the tutor-organiser should be colleagues in a movement concerned with their own and others opportunites for education.

The branch therfore provides a body of people whose view of education is participatory, who, having defined their own educational needs give evidence of the energy that can be released through having such needs met and through continuing to define new possibilities. It is on that basis that the tutor-organiser makes contact with other groups, so that they may do the same thing in their own way.

Voluntary branch members will also want to join with their professional colleagues in promoting and facilitating community adult education. Sometimes this entails joining community organisations so that no opportunity is lost to make an educational contribution or to appreciate what is already education and give it support.

The volunteers in the movement could then become regular consultants to the various residents' groups now emerging in our major cities and towns. It is not possible for a tutor to maintain such contacts on a regular basis and his branch could become an essential part of his team carrying out much of the important work. They could also act as counsellors when needed, and use their contacts to utilise other educational resources in the community.

Sometimes branches will be able to conduct their own surveys of the network of formal and semi-formal groups which already exist in most working class areas to establish the nature of educational needs in such communities. They may sponsor task forces (the Young Volunteer Movement for instance) with a similar purpose if the branch cannot undertake this work, and initiate new joint working arrangements with local authorities, universities and other voluntary bodies. All this adds to the vitality and viability of the branch, attracting the kind of new members who are delighted by the opportunity to influence educational policy.

There is the great advantage of working with a team here in Liverpool. It has been possible to conduct such surveys using E.P.A. team members and volunteers from the University and Colleges of Education. While the E.P.A. team members have also opened up contact with numerous educational bodies, local authority and others, who are prepared to offer their assistance. Given enthusiasm and a sense of purpose this work could be done by the W.E.A. branch, district or development committee.

Co-operation with Local Authorities and the Universities

When branches of this kind are active the basis for co-operation with other bodies is much clearer. Co-operation with others is based on mutual interdependence not the need to avoid duplication with its consequent implications that one or the other of the parties may in fact be redundant.

The movement is rightly proud of its independence and its contribution in maintaining the now fashionable "participation" in all forms of education. This has always been one basis of its strength in relation to the local authorities and the Universities. It has not found it so easy at the local level to find the appropriate means to express more astringent forms of independence. As a promoter of new forms of adult education it can take on the kind of role which CASE, NUS, and similar organisations perform for other sectors of education.

Anyone engaged in community work knows the danger of conflict with local authorities when needs are defined in new ways and resources pursued in a purposeful fashion. There is already evidence that community adult education, often allied, as we have shown, with other forms of community action, will share their need for a base which has a degree of independence. The W.E.A. as a national movement and as a branch is tailor made.

Local Education Authorities

Co-operation under these circumstances can be based on a recognition that different agencies are best suited to provide different kinds of education resources. The local authority has the responsibility for providing the basic services and premises for adult education, as well as teaching in those subjects not usually associated with the W.E.A. But flexibility in the provision of the latter may be difficult for the local authority, particularly if it challenges its own organisation and expectations. If this is the case then, as in Liverpool, the W.E.A. should attempt to provide what is requested even if it is not its usual sort of work, i.e. home management, keep fit, hairdressing, etc. However, really effective action will require joint working arrangements to meet the multitude of educational needs in urban areas.

University adult education.

Co-operation with the universities can also go beyond the present rather anachronous joint-committee arrangements. These are now often no more than ritual forms to indicate friendship rather than genuine operational alliances. Except where the University or the W.E.A. have defined their roles carefully and rigorously it is frequently difficult to tell W.E.A. and University teaching programmes apart.

For community adult education the forms of co-operation can exploit the particular contributions of the two agencies. When specialised teaching is required, or when consultancy and advocacy are the appropriate educational forms as was recently the case in work with the Claimants Union of Liverpool, the University may well be the most appropriate body. When the training of professional, paraprofessional (social workers, clergy, planners, etc.) and voluntary members of the total community adult educational team is required the University itself has a responsibility to its surrounding community not to sit on the sidelines. Finally the Institute of Extension Studies in Liverpool has seen community adult education as an important area of action-research and more traditional research for which resources must now be found.

Now as in the past it would be quite wrong for the Universities to allocate the W.E.A. the most difficult of all tasks, the extension of adult education beyond the present already favoured minority, and to retire smugly to various kinds of ivory tower. They have, however, found it just as difficult to ascertain thier own particular contribution as the W.E.A. in recent years. Community adult education makes possible a continuation of the initial partnership between the universities and the W.E.A. movement, not in continuing or repeating mere traditional forms, but in returning to the central intention and spirit of the pioneer days.

If the W.E.A. and it members can accept that this is not just another obligatory sentimental appeal for "workers education" but a request to put its resources at the disposal of those most in need then a lot of pointless argument may be avoided. Resources are limited and decisions must be made about priorities. Surely, we, of all organisations, should not reflect in our work the priorities of the existing further educational system with its tendency to provide more educational facilities for those already better educated while the majority of the population is untouched and unimpressed. However it is doubtful whether the W.E.A. can readjust its priorities if so much of its work continues to imitate that of the university extra-mural departments. That way can lead to respectablility without purpose at least so far as the W.E.A. is concerned.

We believe there is, within the W.E.A. amongst its full-time officials and branch members an untapped source of support for a new pioneering policy. The idealism is there, the enthusiasm is there. What is needed are clear, practical suggestions for reorganisation of the branch structure, and the role of the voluntary members. This account of the work in Liverpool, and our suggestions for reform, is a step in that direction. The time for such a debate was never more poortune or crucial. If the W.E.A. refuses to take up the challenge then, without any doubt - other organisations will fill the vacuum and the movement will miss the opportunity to achieve a major breakthrough in that aspect of adult education which is, or should be, distinctly its own.

ERIC Clearinghouse

JUL 25 1972

on Adult Education